

## Russia's use of military forces in intra-state conflicts in the CIS

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## **Russia's Use of Military Forces in Intra-State Conflicts in the CIS**

**Bericht des BIOst Nr. 32/1996**

### **Kurzfassung**

#### *Vorbemerkung*

Seit 1991 ist Rußland an einer Reihe gewaltsamer Konflikte auf dem Territorium der Gemeinschaft Unabhängiger Staaten beteiligt. Die militärischen Aktivitäten haben dabei ganz unterschiedliche Gestalt angenommen - von friedenserhaltenden Einsätzen bis hin zu direkter militärischer Intervention -, und sind dementsprechend unterschiedlich bewertet worden - als effiziente Stabilisierung in interethnischen "Konfliktsituationen" oder als Teil einer "Reimperialisierungsstrategie". Bisher ist dabei nicht immer berücksichtigt worden, daß es sich bei den russischen "Peacekeeping"-Aktivitäten um Einsatz militärischer Gewalt zur Stabilisierung - oder "Pazifizierung" einer Region handelt, die als Zone vitaler russischer sicherheitspolitischer Interessen gesehen wird. Der vorliegende Bericht stellt sich daher die Aufgabe, die militärischen Aktivitäten Rußlands im Kontext seiner regionalen Sicherheitsinteressen zu analysieren. Dabei stützt er sich auf eine Reihe von Fallstudien und auf die Auswertung der laufenden Berichterstattung in der Presse.

#### *Ergebnisse*

1. Nachdem die russische Politik in den ersten Jahren nach dem Zerfall der UdSSR zunächst zögerte, in den Konflikten, die innerhalb der neuen unabhängigen Staaten aufbrachen, zu intervenieren, bildete sich seit etwa 1993 in der herrschenden Elite ein Konsens darüber heraus, daß die Region der GUS Bedeutung für russische Sicherheitsinteressen habe. Die fortdauernden Auseinandersetzungen in diesem Raum geboten daher eine militärische Intervention. Dabei ging es zunächst um die Verteidigung der Einheit der russischen Föderation, dann um die Steuerung der Konflikte in der GUS und die Reduzierung des Gewaltniveaus. Darüber hinaus gewannen Motive der Verteidigung der Rechte der russischen Minderheit und des Schutzes der Außengrenzen der Region, der früheren sowjetischen Staatsgrenzen, an Gewicht. Der russische Einfluß in den neuen unabhängigen Staaten sollte gestärkt, fremde Einflüsse sollten zurückgedämmt und der Zugriff auf die wirtschaftlichen Ressourcen der GUS sichergestellt werden. Neben dem nationalen Interesse kommen zudem noch Partikularinteressen einzelner Gruppen - der Machtministerien oder der Eliten einzelner Regionen - zum Tragen.
2. Anfangs lehnte die russische politische Klasse den Einsatz militärischer Gewalt ab. Die Konstituierung von nationalen Regierungen in Tschetschenien, Georgien und Moldova, die sich offen gegen die Moskauer Regierung wandten, sowie die islamistische Bewegung in Tadschikistan wurde von der russischen Politik hingenommen. Im Falle Tschetschenien untersagte der Oberste Sowjet Ende 1991 ausdrücklich den Einsatz militärischer Gewalt. Bald stellte sich jedoch heraus, daß die russische Führung kaum über Mittel verfügte, auf die Entwicklung in diesen Regionen einzuwirken. Die wirtschaftlichen, finanziellen und

diplomatischen Einflußmöglichkeiten Rußlands waren gering, daher griff Rußland auf das einzige Instrument zurück, über das es verfügte - die Streitkräfte.

3. Die Ziele, denen der Einsatz militärischer Gewalt dienen sollte, waren vielfältig. In einigen Fällen ging es um Unterdrückung sezeptionistischer Bewegungen, in anderen darum, Chaos und bewaffnete Gewalt einzudämmen, oder - im Vorfeld von Konflikten - den Frieden zu bewahren. Darüber hinaus zielte der Einsatz aber in einigen Regionen - z.B. in Georgien - auf die Installation und Unterstützung eines rußlandfreundlichen Regimes oder darauf, Voraussetzungen für einen politischen Dialog zu schaffen. Neben solch' eher politischen Intentionen wurden auch rein militärische Absichten verfolgt - die Wahrung des "einheitlichen strategischen Raums" und die Eindämmung möglicher militärischer Bedrohungen. Die Trennlinie zwischen friedlichen Einsätzen und der Anwendung militärischer Gewalt läßt sich in der GUS nicht scharf ziehen. Trugen die Maßnahmen in Südossetien und Transdnistrien durchaus friedenserhaltenden Charakter, so ging es in Georgien Ende 1993 offensichtlich um die Demonstration militärischer Stärke. Wiederholt wurden Truppen im Kontext von Polizeimaßnahmen, bei der Terrorismusbekämpfung oder bei eigenen verdeckten Operationen tätig. Offen wurde militärische Gewalt in einer Reihe friedensschaffender Aktionen, bei der Grenzverteidigung oder - im Falle Tschetschenien - im regelrechten Krieg eingesetzt.
4. Theoretisch wird der Einsatz militärischer Gewalt von den Prinzipien der Legalität, der Prävention und der Nichteinmischung in die inneren Angelegenheiten des anderen Staates bestimmt. In der Praxis war allerdings von all dem wenig zu bemerken. Im Rahmen der GUS gab es in seltenen Fällen Abkommen über friedenserhaltende Schritte, mitunter beschränkt sich die rechtliche Grundlage auf dreiseitige Abkommen zwischen Rußland und den kriegführenden Seiten. Über den Einsatz russischer Truppen entscheidet *de jure* der Präsident, *de facto* scheint die Entscheidung in einem kleinen Zirkel zu fallen. Die Militärs haben anscheinend nirgends den Beginn militärischer Aktionen betrieben. Sobald sie allerdings in die Konflikte verwickelt waren, haben sie sich teilweise der Kontrolle durch die Politik entzogen und auf eigene Faust Entscheidungen getroffen.
5. Es ist klar, daß eine militärische Lösung innerstaatlicher Konflikte nicht möglich ist, vielmehr muß die Politik diese Aufgabe übernehmen. In vielen Fällen ist dies jedoch nicht gelungen. Einsätze russischer Streitkräfte werden durch den Mangel finanzieller Mittel, die Opposition der Wehrpflichtigen und ihrer Verwandten, sowie die sinkende Kampfkraft der Armee behindert. Trotzdem haben die russischen Streitkräfte in einer Reihe von Fällen militärische Erfolge erzielen können, die allerdings von der Politik nicht zur endgültigen Konfliktlösung genutzt wurden. Das hat Rückwirkungen auf die Streitkräfte, die sich an vielen Orten praktisch im Kriege befinden. Fortgesetzte Verluste und wachsende Kosten belasten die russische Politik. Eine klare Strategie der Nutzung militärischer Gewalt ist nicht erkennbar.

## Introduction

For some, it is a question of terminology. There is a long-standing debate as to the true nature of Russian *mirotvorchestvo*, which is literally translated as "peacemaking" or peace-creating. Much has been said about the many differences between the Russian concept and practice in the conflicts in the former Soviet Union and the theory and practice of peacekeeping, as understood in the West, especially in the classic United Nations context, although UN/NATO's massive bombardment of Bosnian Serb targets in the autumn of 1995 has somewhat narrowed the gap here. Some observers have seen in it a manifestation of the enduring expansionist instinct, and have objected at least to the forms of Russian military involvement. Respecting the independence and territorial integrity of the Soviet successor states, and abiding by the rules of international law, when dealing with them are demanded of Russia as a matter of principle.<sup>1</sup> The Chechen war was singled out for special scrutiny and criticism.

Clearly, the Russian approach is anything but impartial, pro-active rather than restrained, and - often more effective. Since 1992, it has been criticized and defended on these counts. Often, the criticism would exploit the theme of the empire, while the defence would present the Russian involvement as a relative success story. Little attempt has been made, however, to take Russian *mirotvorchestvo* for what it obviously is, i.e. the use of military force as a way of stability-building, or pacification, in what is officially regarded as the zone of Moscow's vital national security interests. Thus, it appears artificial to treat various cases of Russian military activism in intra-state conflicts separately. Viewed from this angle, this new Russian interventionism comes much closer to such cases as India's 1988 expedition in Sri Lanka, or Vietnam's 1979 invasion of Cambodia, or the perennial French military activism in Francophone Africa, or even by Israel in Southern Lebanon.

Interestingly, most literature on the subject represents case studies, while works of a more general nature are few. It is the purpose of this paper, then, to examine Russia's modern interventionism as a form of its national security strategy in post-Soviet "hot spots". Also, an attempt will be made to infer from the experience of several years a general pattern of the use of force by Moscow in crisis situations, as well as for conflict-prevention and dispute resolution. With this in mind, the paper is not limited to the cases which are generally recognized as peacekeeping, or which are claimed to be such. In fact, all cases of the use of military force by Russia, whether in the territory of the New Independent States (NIS) or within the Federation itself. It seems to be equally challenging to analyse the situations in which force was not used by the Russian Federation, despite the undisputable conflict potential and the strong interests involved. Finally, it is important to compare this latest Russian experience with the Soviet actions of the late 1980s, from Karabakh to Baku and Tskhinvali to Ferghana and Osh. The subject matter of the paper being so vast, nothing but an outline discussion will be attempted here, with the purpose of establishing a framework for future research.

### 1. Interests Demanding the Use of Force

One would properly start with the question, What interests compel the Russian Federation to use military force in the various zones of conflict? Normally, only vital national security concerns justify the use of military force. It appears that, initially, in late 1991 and early 1992, Russia was extremely reluctant to intervene anywhere, if it meant using military force. The change, when it

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Blackwill in: *Engaging Russia. A Report to the Trilateral Commission No.46, 1995, p.36.*



came, in 1993, was the product of a wide-ranging debate within the Russian political elite on what constituted the Russian national interests, and which of them were vital enough to justify the use of all available means, including the military force.

While this debate is not over yet, there is a growing consensus within the ruling elite that the entire post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) represents an area of Russia's vital national interests, to secure which the new states should be integrated, in one form or another, with the Russian Federation. In the meantime, many of these countries - and Russia itself - are still deep in crisis, which lead to internal conflicts. Russian experts believe that crisis-breeding instability will exist throughout the whole post-Communist transition period, which is tentatively put at between 20 and 30 years for Russia, and up to 50 years, in the case of some of the CIS states. With respect to those conflicts, the following Russian national interests compel Moscow to intervene militarily:

### *Defending the unity of the Russian Federation*

Military force has traditionally been regarded as the ultimate instrument of defending the territorial integrity of the state. The weakening of the Russian state after the disintegration of the Soviet Union has underscored the danger of internal secessionist challenges. The fate of the USSR itself provides an example of the state authorities preferring to abdicate in the face of the nationalist challenge, rather than using military force. Mikhail Gorbachev, who until the last minute tried to keep the Soviet Union together, made no attempt to use force to prevent the break-up of the USSR. (Whether recourse to force was ever an effective alternative is doubtful: suffice it to look at former Yugoslavia.) In much the same way, the Russian Supreme Soviet (parliament) called off in October, 1991, the military action, which had been already launched, to enforce the state of emergency in Chechnya, only weeks after General Dudayev's "revolution".

Soon, however, the new Russian leaders became aware of the danger of the Russian Federation following the fate of the Soviet Union, but in a much less neat and probably violent way. Boris Yeltsin, who had at one time promised the republics within Russia almost unlimited sovereignty, did turn to military force in order to put an end to the Chechen Republic's de-facto independence which, it was felt, threatened to destabilize Russia's North Caucasus, and to provoke other non-Russian republics within the RF, such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Yakutia/Sakha and others into seeking independence from Moscow.<sup>2</sup>

Whether Chechnya's secession<sup>3</sup> would have led to the disintegration of Russia is a moot question. The decision in July 1995 of the Russian Constitutional Court, which endorsed President Yeltsin's decree of December 1994 that served as a legal basis for the military operation in Chechnya, gives a clear signal: secession of any part of Russia will not be tolerated and force may be used, if necessary, to prevent this.

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<sup>2</sup> For a concise official expose of the case against Dudayev's regime, cf., e.g., Vice Premier Sergei Shakhrai. Prezident obespechival bezopasnost Rossii. "Rossiyskaya Gazeta", 12 July 1995, p.1. Also to be noted should be the upper house speaker Vladimir Shumeiko's dark warnings, made in early 1995, to use force, if need be, against illegal armed formations anywhere, be it in Tatarstan or in Volgograd region.

<sup>3</sup> The republic's population is less than 1 per cent, its territory only 0.1 per cent, and potential oil production around 0.3 per cent of Russia's.

### *Keeping the peace inside the Russian Federation*

Immediately after the break-up of the USSR, Russia itself was spared ethnic conflicts inside its territory. This changed with the outbreak of the North Ossetian-Ingush armed conflict in the autumn of 1992. Since that time, two districts affected by the conflict were placed under emergency rule enforced by the federal troops. Despite their presence, occasional acts of violence do happen. This situation was likened by some observers to the one which long existed in Northern Ireland.

Russian forces were deployed to restore order in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria, and then preventively in other parts of the North Caucasus.

### *Managing the crises in the New Independent States*

The crises in the new independent states of the former Soviet Union present a threat of a spillover of armed violence and ethnic strife to Russia. This is facilitated by the existence of open or inadequately controlled borders, the unclarities regarding the issues of citizenship, the existence of Russian minorities in zones of conflict in the NIS and of the various ethnic groups in Russia with ties to the parties to conflicts. Russia cannot ignore this threat and has to deal with it. Crisis-management requires mounting various peace operations, from peacekeeping to peace enforcement.

### *Reducing the level and the scale of violence*

While most conflicts take a long time to resolve, introducing cease-fires can sharply reduce the level of violence and save numerous human lives. Much has been said by official Moscow about the Russian historic responsibility as the successor state of the USSR, or about the need to vindicate post-Communist Russia's democratic credentials, or, more recently, about Russia's leading role in the Commonwealth of Independent States. Whatever one's attitude to these claims, it can be argued that there is no international organization and no power, other than Russia, that has made a serious effort to stop violence in the former USSR.

### *Protecting ethnic Russian minorities*

Much anxiety was expressed in the neighbouring countries about Russian officials' pronouncements regarding the need to protect ethnic Russians in the NIS. The military doctrine of the Russian Federation, adopted in November 1993, contains a passage to that effect. "Behind the Russian border guards in Tajikistan there are 12.5 million ethnic Russians in the Central Asian states and an open border all the way to Moscow", said General Andrei Nikolayev, Director of the Federal Frontier Service.<sup>4</sup>

So far, however, there has been little evidence of Russian use of force to defend the rights of ethnic brethren in what is called the "near abroad". Moldova and Tajikistan come perhaps closest to that, but both of these conflicts were essentially political. The majority of Moldova's Russians live in the part of the republic which did not secede. In Tajikistan, violence was not specifically directed at the Russian community, who suffered greatly, but from the side effects of a clan-driven civil war.

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<sup>4</sup> As quoted by Arkady Dubnov. "Novoye Vremya", No.16, April 1995, p. 12.

In Tajikistan and also in Abkhazia, the Russian armed forces were used to evacuate ethnic Russians - and indeed many others who were fleeing the war - but this was neither the reason nor even the pretext for Russian military involvement. In the absence of clarity regarding whom Russia can rightfully regard as her own, for potentially Russian citizenship is open to virtually all former Soviet passport-holders, no parallel can be drawn between, for example, the August, 1992 Sukhumi evacuation and the rescue operation of U.S. marines in Liberia in 1990.

It is interesting that there was no serious attempt, so far, to use military force to end what is widely perceived in Russia as discriminatory treatment of non-indigenous population in the Baltic States, primarily in Estonia and Latvia, or to back up popular demands that predominantly ethnic Russian-populated Crimea be given independence from Ukraine or be allowed to join Russia where it belonged until 1954. Moscow is obviously not looking for conflicts, and possibly wars with its western neighbours, or for a resumption of confrontation with the West. Most ethnic Russians themselves, fully aware of what they are likely to lose in such an event, come out strongly against military protection from the old metropolis.

### *Defending former Soviet borders*

Russian border troops officers on the Tajik-Afghan border regard the lines they are defending as Russia's true strategic boundaries. If they were withdrawn, the new Tajik state would probably disintegrate, and become the first failed state in the former Soviet Union. Russian officials claim that there is no way they can find funds to construct new border posts and fortifications along Russia's new frontiers.<sup>5</sup>

Sticking to the old borders in the name of defence does not exclude the latent interest in keeping an option for power projection capability. When Russia will have emerged from the period of her historical weakness, the argument goes, she might need the forward positions in places like Moldova, the Caucasus or Central Asia.

### *Strengthening Russia's influence in the NIS*

Russia's forces in the zones of conflict are a visible symbol of Russia's presence. Sending troops to manage conflicts, and arbitrating between the warring parties is a way for Russia to establish itself as the dominant power in Transcaucasia and Central Asia. In the autumn of 1993, Russian military support for the Abkhaz fighting the Georgians, followed by Russia's military support for the Shevardnadze government in Tbilisi against Gamsakhurdist rebels in the west of the country, were instrumental in bringing Georgia into the CIS. The inability of both Baku and Chisinea to resolve conflicts in Karabakh and Transdnistria has been an important factor in the Azeri and Moldovan governments' decision to join the CIS, also in 1993.

Conversely, there are fears that, should the Russian forces withdraw from Tajikistan, this would result in a tremendous loss of Russian prestige.

### *Preventing foreign penetration into the geopolitical space of the former Soviet Union*

Often, Russian forces were sent to the zones of conflict to exclude the possibility that others, whether individual states or international organizations, should take the lead in conflict man-

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<sup>5</sup> The costs are estimated to be around \$500,000 per kilometer, and Russia's border with Kazakhstan alone runs for some 7,000 km. Priority is given to properly equipping frontiers with the Baltic States and Transcaucasia.

agement and dispute resolution. Thus, the decisions to deploy peacekeepers to Moldova (in 1992) and Abkhazia (1994) were prompted by fears that outside countries, such as Romania, or international organizations, as the UN, might get involved in peacekeeping on a significant scale.

The Chechen invasion was in part prompted by the suspected Turkish connection, and the decision to play an active role in Tajikistan, by Moscow's unwillingness to cede Russia's historical positions to the neighbouring countries, such as Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan.

The spread of Islamic fundamentalism is feared by Russian elites as much, or even more, than conventional penetration by foreign powers, in a latter-day version of the Great Game. Thus, Russia is using military means as a principal hedge against a variety of politico-economic and ideological challenges. There is no doubt that Russia is determined to preserve its pre-eminence across the former USSR. It is not clear, however, that the choice of means for this is adequate.

### *Securing control over the natural resources of the NIS*

Securing access to the natural resources of the NIS, or their transportation routes represents the economic interest behind Russian interventionism.

Tajikistan, for instance, has been Russia's principal source of aluminium, titanium-oxide and vanadium catalyzers, vismuth, antimony, barium. The country is also rich in gold and molibdenum, and could well become one of the world's leading producers of gold and silver. No way for Russia to leave, but every reason to stay. Federal Border Service Director Nikolayev declared that his men in Tajikistan were "defending economic and political interests of the Commonwealth".<sup>6</sup> This misses one important point. While the Russian troops, implicated in a civil war in Tajikistan, "defend Russia's economic interests", some of these very riches are being taken over by foreigners.

The prospects for solving the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, where Russia is co-sponsoring the peace process, and the war in Chechnya are linked to the issue of choosing the route for the pipeline which would transport the Caspian Sea oil to Europe. The perceived need to control the Caspian Sea oil and gas fields, and the pipelines, has strengthened Moscow's wish to become the principal peacekeeper in Karabakh, with its forces on the ground. However, the use of force in Chechnya to secure the oil pipeline may be counter-productive: the pipeline has become extremely vulnerable to sabotage.

"Protecting the unity of the economic space of the Federation" was also one of the interests demanding the ending of the Dudayev rebellion. The only two-track railway to Transcaucasia passes through Chechnya. By early 1994, it had become so unreliable that plans were made to build a route around Chechnya. Grozny's oil refineries were built to process between 16 and 20 million tons. Chechnya also used to produce over 90 per cent of aviation oil produced in the USSR. Thus, Russian air force and civil aviation immediately became dependent on Chechnya once it proclaimed its sovereignty. More importantly, the Grozny airport, off limits to Russian passport and customs controls, has become an-all Russian centre for illegal immigration and smuggling. The cost of "protection of unity" by military force, however, is enormous, far outstripping all potential alternatives.

Russia's interest in stopping illicit arms and drugs trafficking are often quoted as demanding the use of border troops, especially on the Tajik-Afghan border, but also on the Chechen section of

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<sup>6</sup> As quoted by Liana Minasyan in "Nezavisimaya Gazeta", 14 April 1995, p. 1.

the border with Georgia and along the administrative boundaries between Chechnya and Daghestan and Ingushetia.

Besides the national interests there are special interests of the particular groups which can play a very significant role, especially now that the Russian state is relatively weak, and the special-interest groups are in a better position than ever to promote their agendas, using the state as a vehicle. These include:

*Interests of various political groups competing for power in Moscow*

In 1991-1993, the Supreme Soviet (the old parliament) used to exploit the conflicts in the NIS in its struggle against the Presidency. Trying to champion the cause of Russian patriotism and looking for allies against the executive, it supported, in particular, the Transdnistrians against Chisinea, the Abkhazians against Tbilisi, and, most strongly, Simferopol in its political dispute against Kiev.

Closely linked with those are interests of various agencies of the Russian government, such as the "power ministries".<sup>7</sup> Usually, these agencies are interested in bolstering their positions within the government, securing a larger share of the federal budget, etc. A way of achieving this is through demonstrating their importance and utility to the state where they enjoy a monopoly, i.e. in the use of force.

In certain cases, regional interests may exercise substantial influence at the federal level. The case of Nikolai Yegorov, a former governor of Krasnodar in southern Russia with strong ties to the local Cossack movement, who as Nationalities Minister and Deputy Premier (in 1994-1995) was among the prime movers of the Chechen war, is very significant, but not unique. President Askharbek Galazov of North Ossetia, considered by Moscow to be the most reliable ally in the volatile region of the North Caucasus, had considerable influence on the Russian decision to engage in a peacekeeping operation in South Ossetia (June 1992), and on the way Russian forces were used during the Ossetian-Ingush conflict (in the autumn of 1992).

Private interests of high officials and business circles whom they patronise are by no means trifle in the contemporary Russian context. Informal coalitions are formed not so much to protect and promote the perceived national interest, for example, in Tajikistan, but to make personal profits on illegal cross-border deals.<sup>8</sup> Arms deals involving transfers of large quantities of arms out of the local Russian arsenals are notorious in Transcaucasia. There are allegations that the pro-Abkhaz lobby, which remains strong even in 1995, is motivated, in part, by financial and economic interests of top military.<sup>9</sup> Chechnya, however, stands out even against this background. Many Russians believe that the war there was started to cover up illegal dealings between Dudayev and groups in Moscow. Arkady Volski, the deputy head of the Russian delegation at the Grozny talks with the Chechens, alluded in an NTV interview in August 1995 that both sides to the conflict could, in fact, have the same masters, after which he was effectively dropped from the delegation.

A brief examination of the interests, in the name of which Russia has been willing to use military force in various ways in the NIS demonstrates that most of these interests are real and in many cases vital to the security of the Russian Federation. Moscow's intervention to protect these

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<sup>7</sup> This term normally includes Defence and Interior, as well as the security community.

<sup>8</sup> A deputy Interior Minister of Tajikistan claimed in an interview that Russian military transport planes were used to smuggle drugs out of Tajikistan.

<sup>9</sup> Konstantin Eggert. Ideya federalizma ne nakhodit zhivogo otklika v Gruzii i Abkhazii. "Izvestia", 31 August 1995, p. 3.

interests makes Russia a very interested peacemaker indeed. This can hardly change: in theory, Russia can be impartial towards the warring sides in a particular area. There is no way, however, that she can be impartial towards what she regards as her national interests.

The problem lies elsewhere. Russian domestic politics make consensus-building on any foreign-policy issue, including assigning relative priorities to the often competing interests, and of reaching agreement on the ways of protecting those interests, a highly difficult, if not impossible task. Too often, in the conflict of various national interests, it is the parochial interests of individual groups that prevail.

The interests described above can be pursued in many ways, not all of them requiring the use of military power. What are the reasons, then, for the particular choice of instruments?

## **2. Reasons for Using the Military**

The Soviet Union grew out of a bitter civil war, in the course of which the Red Army spear-headed Communist revolution in many of the provinces of the former Russian empire, such as Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia in Transcaucasia, or Bukhara in Central Asia, which briefly enjoyed independence from 1917 till 1921. In the 1920s, the army was used to subdue armed resistance in parts of Central Asia, and in the 1940s, NKVD troops were used to forcibly resettle those ethnic groups, such as Chechens or Crimean Tartars, which had been accused by Stalin of having cooperated with the Germans. Throughout the 1940s and the 1950s, regular forces conducted operations against guerilla fighters in mountainous Chechnya, or in the forests of Lithuania and western Ukraine. 1962 saw the use of the Soviet army against Russian workers in the town of Novocherkassk, the first such employment against ethnic Russians since the defeat of anti-Communist sailors in Kronstadt and the ending of a peasant revolt in Tambov region in 1921.

Throughout most of the Soviet period, it was police repression and fear, rather than open violence, which ensured internal stability.

As the Soviet Union started to disintegrate, there was general reluctance, on behalf of the Gorbachevian leadership, to use force against nationalist aspirations in the republics. The cases where force was used, as in Tbilisi in April 1989, in Baku in January 1990, or in Vilnius in January 1991, demonstrated the unwillingness of the political leadership to assume responsibility for armed intervention, which led to the progressive demoralization of the armed forces and their alienation from the political masters. Public opinion in the country quickly became hostile to the very idea of the "internal function" of the Armed Forces.

Immediately after the dissolution of the USSR, the new Russian authorities shied away from using force. Predominantly was a benign view of the nationalist governments in Georgia, Moldova, the Islamists in Tajikistan, and even the Dudayev regime in Chechnya as political allies of the Russian radical democrats. In the latter case, Russian President Yeltsin's proclamation of the state of emergency in November, 1991, was countermanded by the Russian Supreme Soviet (parliament). The use of force remained politically unacceptable.

While non-interference continued to be the official policy line, withdrawal from the empire went ahead. In the process, Tbilisi and Chisinea received from the Russian military large quantities of arms and ammunition, which were soon used in internal conflicts.

Where force was used, it was often prompted by the situation, rather than by a careful analysis of the interests involved.

Very little attention having been paid to preventing conflicts, the Russian leadership was often surprised by the events and had to act urgently to stop a conflict which had already begun. Even conflicts within Russia were allowed to germinate, develop and burst out, as in the case of North Ossetia and Ingushetia (October 1992) or Chechnya (December 1994).

Of the various components of national power, the military component was in many cases the only one which was readily available. Soviet forces deployed in the non-Slav republics of the former USSR, now independent states, were taken over by the Russian Federation, which thus received military instruments in the "near abroad". Other resources, such as economic, financial, diplomatic, were either lacking or very scarce. Especially notorious was the lack of financial resources. Many Russian officials admit that, if money were available, there would be far less of an incentive to use force. At least in one instance, however, the decision to use military force was taken and sustained irrespective of financial considerations. There are unconfirmed reports that the military operation in Chechnya has cost about \$5bn.

Decisions to resort to military force were also prompted by the residual elements of the imperial tradition and by certain historical stereotypes. It is also widely perceived by most Russian military officers and many government officials that in the Caucasus and Central Asia raw power and the willingness to use it are generally respected, while preference for negotiations is seen as an unmistakable sign of weakness. Not to be overlooked is the fact that most of the senior military commanders, from Minister Grachev down, have had their first combat experience in Afghanistan, which influenced their thinking enormously.

Lastly, the mentality of the Russian political elite still tends to overvalue the utility of military force, which continues to be perceived as offering the "final solution", however brute this might be.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. Objectives Sought through the Use of Military Force**

The general political objectives of the use of Russian military force include:

Crushing a secessionist rebellion and reestablishing the federal authorities' control over the entire area of the RF

This was attempted, and almost accomplished, in Chechnya. The military claim, however, that the decision, taken in June, 1995, to stop fighting and start negotiating has robbed Russia of the fruits of military victory, so dearly paid for. Although Chechnya remains, to this date, the only case of outright rebellion within the RF, the notice served by the federal military operation on other would-be secessionists is obvious.

#### *Stopping armed violence, ending chaos and lawlessness*

This objective was fully achieved in South Ossetia and Transdnistria. Since the introduction in 1992 of Russian peacekeeping forces to these two areas, fighting has not resumed there.<sup>11</sup> In Abkhazia, Russian peacekeepers' authority to protect local civilians, mostly ethnic Georgians, from armed robbery and other forms of violence is limited to the 12-km-wide security zone where they are deployed.

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<sup>10</sup> For the official explanation of the reasons for using military force in Chechnya, see: Andrei Kozyrev. Partnership or Cold Peace? "Foreign Policy", No. 99, Summer 1995, pp. 3-14, esp. pp. 6-7.

<sup>11</sup> The conflict in Moldova led to over 1,000 dead, about 5,000 wounded, over 100,000 refugees.

In other cases, Russian military intervention probably prevented larger-scale bloodshed and destruction. General Andrei Nikolaev, Director of Russia's Federal Border Service, is certain that, "without the Border Troops, there would be civil war in Tajikistan".<sup>12</sup> General Anatoli Kulikov, once commander of the Interior Ministry Forces in North Ossetia and Ingushetia, claimed that, "without the Russian Interior Forces, not just the villages of Kartsa or Chermen, but the city of Vladikavkaz would lie in ruins".<sup>13</sup>

In the case of Chechnya, stopping an intra-Chechen strife was one of the arguments used by the Russian government to justify a federal military operation. This goal was accomplished, but not in the way it had been foreseen. Predictably, intra-Chechen fighting was merely postponed in the name of resisting the federal forces. Meanwhile, Russian military commanders claim that a withdrawal from Chechnya would provoke a bloodbath there.

Prevention of a civil war in a neighbouring country, or in a part of Russia itself is among the objectives most frequently cited. However, as the case of Afghanistan shows, even a massive Russian intervention may not be sufficient to reach it.

As to the defence of human rights, or fighting crime, the record is rather mediocre. Russian peacekeepers are barred from interfering in the internal affairs of the territories where they are located. In Abkhazia, for instance, they were unable to resist ethnic cleansing; in Tajikistan, to do anything against the atrocities committed by all sides; in Transdnistria, General Alexander Lebed's long campaign against high-level corruption in Tiraspol ended in the Russian general's dismissal.

### *Keeping the peace*

In the cases where there was peace to keep (as in South Ossetia, Moldova and North Ossetia/Ingushetia since 1992, and the zone of the Georgian/Abkhazian conflict since 1994), the presence of the Russian peacekeepers has ensured observance of the cease-fire agreements, as well as contributed to political dialogue between the sides. One notable failure has been the lack of progress towards the return of the refugees (including about 200,000 ethnic Georgians who fled Abkhazia in 1993). In the absence of a final settlement in any of these conflicts, cease-fire lines, patrolled by Russian peacekeepers, have solidified into something resembling inter-state borders. This allowed unrecognized entities, such as the Republic of Abkhazia, the Dniestrian Moldavian Republic, to function as de-facto independent states.

### *Installing friendly political forces in power and supporting them ever since*

This is a less well advertized but a very obvious objective of the use of the Russian military. In Georgia in January, 1992, the CIS forces reporting to Moscow materially assisted the rebels who toppled President Zviad Gamsakhurdia to make room for Edward Shevardnadze. In the autumn of 1993, Russian forces were deployed to western Georgia to suppress Gamsakhurdia's last effort to regain power. Immediately following an assassination attempt against Shevardnadze in August, 1995, a close aid to Defence Minister Grachev was dispatched to Tbilisi. Russian military support was crucial for the Popular Front and President Emomali Rakhmonov which emerged victorious in the civil war in Tajikistan in the autumn and winter of 1992. The

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<sup>12</sup> Andrei Nikolaev as quoted by Arkady Dubnov in "Yes' li u Rossii 'tajikskaya politika". "Novoye Vremya", No. 16, April 1995, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Anatoli Kulikov, as quoted by "Krasnaya Zvezda", quoted in Ossipova, p. 22.



Transdniestrian and Abkhazian governments, and their self-proclaimed states, were both rescued in 1992 by Russian intervention. The military invasion of Chechnya was launched after a failed Russian covert operation attempted in late November, 1994, which was to have toppled the Dudayev regime and installed a pro-Moscow administration.

This raises an important question: How controllable are Moscow's clients? Even Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov questioned the wisdom of supporting the Rakhmonov government in Dushanbe, which didn't always accept Moscow's and Tashkent's advice, let alone always follow it.

Shevardnadze did not agree to what was demanded of him - entry into the CIS and allowing permanent Russian military presence in Georgia - until after the Abkhazian victory in September, 1993, which made him much more pliant.

Transdniestrian President Igor Smirnov and the Abkhazian leader Vladislav Ardzinba, both in place since the break-up of the Soviet Union, have been acting at times very independently from Moscow, despite the fact that they owed their positions to Russian military support. Tiraspol and Sukhumi have been able to exploit Russia's current weakness and to muster whatever support they enjoyed in the Russian capital. Thus, using puppets has not been very successful for Russia.

Military force can also be used indirectly to support those whom Moscow regards as its allies. North Ossetia is a good example of this. Against the background of strong historical ties, common religion and traditional military connections, the conflict between Ossetians and Georgians led to a "special relationship" being formed between the Ossetian President Askharbek Galazov and Moscow. North Ossetian paramilitary units were armed with the weapons provided by the Russian Interior Ministry to the South Ossetian peacekeepers.<sup>14</sup> North Ossetian laws of October 1992 establishing in the republic a unified paramilitary force, though characterized as anticonstitutional by the federal authorities, were neither disbanded nor disarmed.

### *Creating conditions for political dialogue*

In virtually all cases, the use of Russian forces to keep or enforce peace was followed by a political dialogue between the warring factions, with Russia acting as either a sole mediator, or as a prominent member of an international group. In the Chechnya case, after seven months of hostilities, it was the Russian Federation itself which started negotiations with its military opponents.

The presence of Russian forces in the zones of conflict was invariably used by Moscow to push the local sides to solutions desirable from the Russian standpoint, such as transforming unitary states into federations. The Russian government, for instance, made a linkage between the withdrawal of the 14th army (in 1995 renamed as an operational group) from Transdnistria and the political settlement of the dispute in Moldova.

Russian forces, however, have been unable to ensure the return of the refugees, even in the cases where that was explicitly provided for in the relevant agreements. An attempt by the then Deputy Defence Minister Georgi Kondratyev to force through the return of Georgians to Abkhazia failed in 1994, due to the Abkhazian resistance and the lack of support for Kondratyev in Moscow. Victor Polyanichko, Deputy Prime Minister of Russia and head of the Russian emergency administration in North Ossetia/Ingushetia was murdered in 1993, after he had reportedly agreed to the return of some Ingush refugees.

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<sup>14</sup> Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 23 March 1994.

### *Restoring a common defence space of the former Soviet republics*

Since the dissolution of the USSR, Russian defence planners have been looking for ways to keep together the defence space of the former USSR. In the new geostrategic situation in which the RF found itself, namely, the much reduced likelihood of global and even large-scale regional confrontation, it is local wars and military conflicts which command the attention of Russian strategists. The basic military reasons for new alliance-building efforts in the CIS are twofold: First, to create a new glacis, a buffer zone in the west and the south; and second, to use, to the fullest extent possible, the old Soviet infrastructure and thus avoid the expenses which the weakened and crisis-ridden Russian economy was simply unable to carry. The need to manage the ethnic conflicts in the NIS was regarded as both a challenge and an incentive to build collective security structures.

Due to the reluctance or the inability of other CIS states to fully cooperate with Russia in this field, the first, and so far the only, CIS Collective Peacekeeping Force was organized in September 1993 in Tajikistan. Only military observers from other CIS states arrived in 1994 to Abkhazia, where the peacemaking operation is formally being run under the auspices of the CIS. With time, Moscow's Central Asian allies have become war-weary. Having suffered losses, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan said in May 1995 that they might withdraw their units, for they have no intention of becoming perpetual hostages to the war in Tajikistan.

### *The military objectives include: Eliminating sources of military danger to Russia*

In 1991-1994, the de-facto independent Chechen republic has grown into a potential military threat to the interests of the Russian Federation in the North Caucasus. General Dudayev has managed to create an armed force of 15,000 well-trained soldiers, equipped with several dozen tanks, heavy guns, aircraft. Even after nine months of fighting, the Chechens were still credited with possessing some 80,000 small arms and some heavy weapons.

### *Containing military threats*

Although lying hundreds and thousands of miles from the Russian territory, Afghanistan is considered to be a formidable source of military instability which may affect Russia. There is no way, of course, to "eliminate" that source. Thus, it has to be contained. In Tajikistan, the Russian forces have been trying to erect a genuine "iron curtain" to protect the Russian sphere of interests.

Other forms of containment include sealing internal administrative boundaries, as those between Chechnya and the neighbouring republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia and the Stavropol territory, to cut off arms supplies to the Chechen rebels.

### *Disengagement, observation and cease-fire monitoring*

In their peacekeeping role, the Russian forces build a barrier between the warring sides: security zones were created along the Dniester (1992), and the Inguri River (Georgia/Abkhazia, 1994), or a corridor (Georgia/South Ossetia, 1992). No heavy weapons are allowed within these zones.

On one occasion, in September, 1993, the Russian forces grossly violated their duties by allowing the Abkhazians to make use of their heavy weapons, placed in the Russian custody, to start an offensive against the Georgians which ended in the latter's defeat.

### *Disarmament and disbandment of opposing forces*

Disarming "unofficial armed formations" has been attempted only on the Russian territory. (Inside the security zones, a form of "gun control" is practised). In Chechnya, an attempt at disarmament initially led to a full-scale war. Later, disarmament was turned into the main provision of the military agreement signed between the federal authorities and Dudayev's delegation in July, 1995. Implementation of that agreement, however, had been proceeding very slowly, which led the Russian command to threaten the Dudayevites with forcible disarmament, i.e. the resumption of hostilities.

Ever since Gorbachev's 1988 decree on disarmament of unofficial armed formations the number of weapons of all kinds in unofficial hands in the USSR/Russia has been growing at an alarming rate.

Among other military objectives it would be in order to mention mine-clearing, in view of the extensive, and often chaotic, mine-laying practised in the various conflicts, especially in Abkhazia and Chechnya.

Besides political and military objectives, Russia's pacification efforts have a range of economic, social and psychological goals. These include rendering medical and other humanitarian aid, and policing to ensure public safety and guarantee human rights.<sup>15</sup>

As any analysis of Russia's interests and policies is likely to bear out, there is no such thing as a clear concept of pacification which would be integrated into a unified national security strategy. In general, Russian authorities usually take a short-term view, and tend to react to the crises.

## **4. Typology of Military Operations in the CIS**

The line between essentially peaceful and warlike actions in peace operations in the CIS is rather blurred. From keeping the peace to waging war. Mandates for particular operations are sometimes non-existent, and the orders are unclear. It is thus possible to identify several types of mission, which sometimes succeed each other, or run parallel within the same operation.

Peacekeeping, i.e. the deployment of neutral Russian forces, under an agreement with all sides to the conflict. This has been practised in South Ossetia since June, 1992, and in Transdniestria since July, 1992.

Humanitarian and rescue operations: evacuation of refugees from the zone of conflict, and providing the remaining civilian population with humanitarian supplies, were carried out in Abkhazia in 1992-1993, and, intermittently, in Tajikistan from 1992 onwards. On the other hand, there has been no purely humanitarian intervention of the kind attempted by the UN in Somalia, or the U.S. in Haiti.

Deterrence, i.e. the show of force and the willingness to use it, was attempted successfully, and in its purest form, in Georgia in October and November of 1993. The Russian forces took control of major communications in the western parts of the country, leaving no chance to anti-Shevardnadze rebels who had to give up their bid for power. The Russian-led Collective Peacekeeping Force in Tajikistan is another example of "strategic" deterrence, which is, however, constantly tested at the "tactical" level on the border. To make deterrence credible, the 201st MRD has to provide combat support to the border troops.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Law on the Provision of Military and Civilian Personnel.

Police action to stop conflict in the Russian territory was undertaken in November, 1992, in North Ossetia's Prigorodny district, which is also claimed by neighbouring Ingushetia. Since then, the military have been the mainstay of the state of emergency regime in that area.

Counter-terrorist operations have assumed unprecedented proportions during, and in the wake of, the Budyonovsk hostage-taking in the summer of 1995. Covert subversive operations include the use of force which is not officially admitted. The November, 1994, raid into Grozny, ostensibly conducted by the anti-Dudayev Provisional Council of Chechnya, but actually masterminded by Russia's Federal Security Service, is a prime but not the only example. Before that, Grozny was bombed by unidentified warplanes, as was the then Georgian-held Sukhumi in March, 1993.<sup>16</sup> In October, 1992, Shevardnadze's plane was attacked by unidentified Mi-24 helicopters near the Russian border.

Border defence is the main action the Russian forces have seen in Tajikistan since the installation of the Rakhmonov government in Dushanbe in December, 1992. Similar mission was assigned the Border Troops in Chechnya, especially along the borders with Georgia and the internal boundaries with Daghestan and Ingushetia. In the Tajik case, border defence is complemented with punitive action against guerilla bases in the adjacent territory of Afghanistan, which has come under occasional bombardment, sometimes denied by the Russian military.

Peacemaking per se, i.e. openly taking sides in an armed conflict in order to stop it and impose peace, was performed by the 14th army in Transdnistria in June, 1992, and in the autumn and winter of 1992 in Tajikistan. Close to that comes the behaviour of the Russian military in Abkhazia in 1992-1993. In these three cases, peacemaking was successful. However, it miserably failed in Chechnya in December, 1994, and had to be replaced by war-fighting.

War-fighting remains an extreme, but realistic type of mission. The Chechen war of 1994-1995, the largest military campaign since Afghanistan, opened mistakenly as a massive police action, after the failure of the covert operation, soon degenerated to a full-scale local conflict.

### *Russia's Principles for Using Force*

Among the principles for using force in intra-state conflicts, Russian authors name legality, prevention, careful preparation, and non-interference in internal affairs. This, however, largely represents an ideal model, not to say wishful thinking. Thus, in the absence of relevant laws, ordinary military units, which happened to be deployed in the areas of conflict, as in Abkhazia in 1992-1993, were getting their peacemakers' status by order of the Ministry of Defence. Preventive deployment has not been practised anywhere in the CIS. The Chechnya operation represents an extreme case of unpreparedness, but in many other cases preparation was minimal. Non-interference in internal affairs is, under the circumstances, a very relative notion.

The more pertinent principles include: for peacekeeping - a cease-fire agreement preceding deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces; for war-fighting, achieving a military victory as a pre-requisite for a political settlement.

## **5. Decision-Making on the Use of Force**

The process of decision-making on the use of military force is as good an indication as any of the state of, and the prospects for, Russia's democratization.

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<sup>16</sup> One Su-27 was shot down, and the pilot, a Russian Air Force major, was identified.

The legal basis for the use of military forces by Russia includes international agreements of the Russian Federation; the RF Constitution and laws; executive orders; court rulings.

The issue of legality of the use of force is highly prominent, but far from resolved, in present-day Russia. After decades of Soviet arbitrariness, Russian society and the Armed Forces are especially sensitive to the issue of how legal the use of the military is in each particular case. Concerned that they not be made to pay for their political masters' blunders, the military have been demanding early passage of the law on peacekeeping from the parliament, and status agreements from the diplomats. This yearning for legislation to protect Russian soldiers coexists with a clear disdain for laws and legality.

Russian officials routinely claim that RF peacemaking operations are in full agreement with the UN Charter and norms. A close examination will no doubt find many divergencies between Russian and traditional UN practice, but as the latter is evolving (for instance, in Bosnia), the traditional norms are becoming less relevant in the new situations.

To take account of the Russian situation in the CIS, the CSCE/OSCE has been developing provisions for Third-Party Peacekeeping, which would give the Russian forces an OSCE status, while giving the international organization a degree of control over their actions. This compromise, however, does not have a good chance of succeeding.

Within the CIS, there are a number of agreements on peacekeeping, starting with the Kiev accord of March 1992. It was not until September 1993, however, that the first Collective Peacekeeping Force of the CIS was formed, for Tajikistan. The legal basis for the CPKF is formed by the Resolution of the Council of the CIS Heads of State and the Agreement on the CPKF and Joint Measures for Their Material-Technical Support, both signed on 24 September 1993. The peacekeeping operation in Abkhazia was endorsed by the Statement by the CIS leaders of 15 April 1994.

The CIS umbrella is more apparent than real, however. Two years on, the CPKF consists of a Russian motorized infantry division, an independent infantry battalion from Uzbekistan, and a Kirghiz company. In Abkhazia, the non-Russian CIS presence is limited to observers. While in theory the 12 heads of state have to approve the collective peacekeeping mandate every six months, in reality the decision to go on or stop rests with the Russians and, to a certain extent, the conflicting sides.

In theory, the Commanding Officer of the CPKF reports to four Presidents of the countries participating in the operation, and is answerable to the four defence ministers, who must endorse the "major actions requiring the use of combat forces", as well as CPKF plans. In an emergency, the CPKF Commander can take decisions at his own discretion. The reality is different. Other reports suggest that all major decisions by the commanding general have first to be cleared with the Defence Ministry in Moscow.<sup>17</sup>

Trilateral agreements on peacekeeping operations between both warring sides and the Russians have been the hallmark of Russian peacekeeping. The accords signed at Dagomys, June 1992 (Georgia/South Ossetia), Moscow, July 1992 (Moldova/Transdniestria) provide a convenient model which is clearly preferred by Moscow, for it eliminates outsiders and gives Russia the power of the sole arbiter. In Karabakh, Tajik and Abkhazian disputes, the Russians have been trying to adopt the same model, but their efforts met with only partial success.

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<sup>17</sup> Igor Korotchenko, in "Nezavisimaya Gazeta", 14 April 1995, p. 1.

Bilateral agreements provide for the stationing of Russian forces in the CIS states, and for co-operation in the guarding of borders. These include, notably, treaties with Georgia, Armenia, and Tajikistan.

### *Use of military forces in Russian law*

The Russian Constitution, in force since December, 1993, makes the President, as Head of State, primarily responsible for conducting the country's foreign, defence and security policy. The missions of the Armed Forces are stipulated in the 1992 Law on Defence, and in the law on the provision of military and civilian personnel for peacekeeping operations. The Fundamentals of the Military Doctrine assign the Armed Forces the tasks of peacekeeping, stopping border conflicts, and stopping conflicts within the RF.

The President as head of state, the guarantor of the Constitution and the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces has the right to take a decision on the use of military force, even without going through the tortuous procedure of declaring a state of emergency.

There are indications that major decisions on the use of military forces are taken within a very small circle of decision-makers, some of whom are the President's personal aides, responsible only to the head of state. In this sense, there is little difference, indeed, between the decisions to go into Afghanistan in 1979 and to enter Chechnya in 1994.

Abruptness of the decision-making process within the Executive branch was demonstrated by both the decision to launch the military operation in December 1994 and the decision to negotiate following the terrorist attack in Budyonnovsk in June 1995.

The Prime Minister, under the Russian system, is not given full authority over the "power ministries" and the MFA. Throughout 1992, Yegor Gaidar's main preoccupation, not unlike his Soviet predecessors', was with the economy, not with national security affairs. Victor Chernomyrdin's spectacular action, during the hostage-taking at Budyonnovsk in July 1995, to assume control over the "Chechen affairs", was an isolated episode without far-reaching consequences for the decision-making process.<sup>18</sup>

### *The powers of the Legislature*

The Federation Council, or the upper chamber of the Federal Assembly, has to approve the use of Russian armed forces abroad. (Art.102 of the Constitution). Upon Presidential request, the Council decides on the advisability of the sending of military forces abroad for peacekeeping purposes.

This chamber is made up of the representatives of Russia's 89 regions, some of which may have different views on the use of force abroad, or even within the RF. In January, 1995, heads of several republics within Russia, many of them traditionally Moslem, convened a special meeting at Cheboksary (Chuvash Republic), to protest against the military operation of the Federal forces in Chechnya. Nikolai Fyodorov, President of the Chuvash Republic and the former Russian justice minister, promulgated a decree banning the participation in that operation of draftees from Chuvashia. (The decree was immediately annulled by President Yeltsin). Sympathies for

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<sup>18</sup> Chernomyrdin himself confirmed that in a newspaper interview. Cf."Izvestia", 13 September 1995, pp. 1 and 2.

Dudayev in some of the Moslem republics are a well-known fact. There were even accusations of regional authorities helping the Chechens.<sup>19</sup>

The powers of the Judiciary are limited to constitutional and legal oversight of the military's actions, which will be discussed later.

### *The role of the top military command*

Under the Soviet Communist system, the Armed Forces were tightly controlled by the political authorities. Since the abolition of the ancien régime, their autonomy has significantly increased. In the Russian Federation, they have managed to carve out a niche for themselves in what is normally part of foreign policy. By design as well as by default, the military have become policy leaders on such issues as Russia's relations with the conflict-torn nations of the Caucasus, Moscow's policy on Tajikistan, and, to a very large extent, the Crimea/Black Sea Fleet issue. It also has to be remembered that from the break-up of the USSR in December 1991 until May 1992 the Russian Federation did not have a military establishment of its own. The Joint Armed Forces of the CIS, while misnamed and actually fictitious, did retain a certain measure of independence vis-a-vis the new governing group in Moscow.

Apparently nowhere were the Russian military the prime instigators of peace operations. When entrusted with the practical conduct of an operation, they tend toward exercising full control of it, brushing civilians aside. The case of Chechnya is very characteristic in this regard: The military were not among the authors of the decision to march into Chechnya, but later they stayed unresponsive to the politicians' attempts to constrain their actions.

The Defence Ministry and the General Staff are not the only military actors in pacification operations. Russian field commanders in the zones of conflict assumed an unprecedented independence and unusual influence, especially during the period of transition from the USSR Armed Forces to the still-born Joint Armed Forces of the CIS to the national Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. It was not until April, 1992, when many conflicts, such as in South Ossetia or Transdnistria had been raging for many months, that Moscow placed ex-Soviet forces beyond Russia's borders under its jurisdiction. Later, the military were affected by the fierce political struggle in Moscow itself, and which only ended with the violent showdown in October, 1993.

Some commanders, such as General Alexander Lebed, who in 1992-1995 commanded the 14th Army in Moldova, publicly questioned a broad range of official policies. Others pursued a "foreign policy of their own": While Moscow officially supported the coalition government in Tajikistan, the local Russian military supported the Popular Front.<sup>20</sup> Despite the ongoing Tajik-Tajik dialogue, which Moscow supported, the Russian military continue to oppose giving the opposition the right to engage in political activity inside Tajikistan.<sup>21</sup> In Georgia, Edward Shevardnadze was clearly a bête noire of most Russian generals, who intensely resented his record as the Soviet Union's foreign minister.

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, Vice-Premier Sergei Shakhrai named the President of Bashkortostan, Murtaza Rakhimov, as someone who allowed the training of Chechen fighters in his republic. "Vek", 19 August 1995.

<sup>20</sup> Dodojoni Atovullo (editor of a Tajik émigré newspaper), "Za chto gibnut russkie soldaty v Tajikistane". "Izvestia", 13 April 1995, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Vitali Strugovets. "Votsaritsya li mir pod 'Kryshei mira'?" "Krasnaya Zvezda", 9 June 1995, p. 3.

### *The role of the MVD*

The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), which has its own troops some 300,000 strong, is supposed to play a leading role in Russia's efforts at internal pacification. Since 1992, this has been the case in Prigorodny district, the area of the Ossetian-Ingush conflict. In Chechnya, however, the MVD was unable to defeat Dudayev's forces, and had to accept the Armed Forces' primacy. While the first overall commander of the federal forces in Chechnya was an MVD general, later this job went to Army men.

### *The role of the Border Troops*

Like the MVD troops, the size of Border Troops (PV) has been growing, to reach about 200,000. The Federal Border Service (FPS), until 1991 part of the KGB, has assumed an independent status immediately under the President, and its Director sits on the RF Security Council together with the ministers of Defence, Internal Affairs, and the security services chiefs. General Grachev's attempts to place the PV under the operational command of the general Staff have been thwarted. So far, the FPS has managed to establish itself as a co-equal of the other "power ministries".

In the various conflicts where his men are involved, the FPS Director retains a broad freedom of action. Thus, the decision on whether the PV would adhere to the Tehran inter-Tajik accord was made by the FPS Director himself.<sup>22</sup>

The Border Troops have been maintaining, since early 1995, that they are not bound by the inter-Tajik cease-fire agreement, signed in Tehran in December, 1994. Thus, the Frontier Forces refused the ban on re-deployment. As far as the Frontier Forces were concerned, the Dushanbe regime was the only legal government in Tajikistan, bound to Moscow by a treaty, while the opposition was a group of bandits. In December, 1994, the opposition accused the Russian border guards of arrests of local fighters and their handover to the Dushanbe authorities, and of capturing opposition arms depots. In March, 1995, the Russians airlifted Dushanbe government's formations from Kulyab to the border in Pamir and disarmed local fighters. (Dubnov, NV 16/95, p.14). As a result, relations in Badakhshan soured to such an extent that a conflict ensued between the opposition and the self-defence forces, on the one hand, and the border guards, on the other, in April, 1995.

### *The role of the Federal Security Service (FSB)*

As the main successor of the KGB, the Federal Security Service (80,000 members) takes the lead in information-gathering/processing/dissemination, and is involved in covert operations. In the case of Chechnya, both types of activity came in for heavy criticism. Col.General Yevgeni Podkolzin, commander of the Airborne Forces, publicly accused the FSB (at the time known as FSK) of misleading the military as to the size and capabilities of Dudayev's forces. The unfortunate covert operation in Grozny in late November, 1994, masterminded by the FSK, not only tarnished the reorganized agency's reputation, but very likely precipitated the Kremlin's decision to intervene in force in Chechnya, even without due preparation.

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<sup>22</sup> Oleg Panfilov. Rossiyskie samolety bombyat badakhshanskije kishlaki. "Nezavisimaya Gazeta", 12 April 1995, p. 1.



### *Cooperation and conflicts among the "Power Ministries".*

The enhanced status of the cabinet ministries in post-Soviet Russia provides good opportunities for the power ministries to pursue their own interests, or implement their leaders' concepts. When these broadly agree, this results in an alliance which is virtually invincible, in bureaucratic terms. In the last few years of the USSR, the power ministries' only formidable opponent was the Foreign Ministry, or MID. Recently, however, the evolution of the MID's policies has placed it firmly in the "power camp". Tajikistan and Chechnya are both the results of this harmonious relationship.

In Tajikistan, the "power ministries" and the MID agreed that the Rakhmonov regime, though far from perfect, was preferable to any experiment with transition.

When conflicts do occur, they are tactical in scope and nature. In Tajikistan, for example, there has been some friction between the Frontier Forces (PV) and the Russian-led Collective Peacekeeping Force. CPKF supported the PV, which were regarded to be "the first echelon of the Collective Peacekeeping Force".<sup>23</sup> Later, however, there were complaints of a lack of armor, artillery and aerial support to the Border Troops from the CPKF. These were made against the background of Defence Minister Grachev's attempts to integrate the Federal Border Service within the defence establishment.

During the Chechnya operation, which initially saw little coordination among the forces reporting to different ministries, tension ran high at times between army and MVD troops, and between the latter and the frontier forces in Grozny. (1995). The appointment, in August 1995, of Oleg Lobov, Secretary of the RF Security Council, as the President's representative in Chechnya, made him the most senior Russian official in the territory, a kind of a viceroy, empowered to give orders to cabinet ministers. In the zone of the North Ossetia/ Ingushetia conflict, where, unlike Chechnya, a state of emergency was officially declared (in November 1992), a Provisional Administration was established, more or less along the lines of the Soviet administration for Nagorno-Karabakh in the late 1980s.

The cumbersome and often confusing process of decision-making in the matters pertaining to the use of military forces for pacification purposes gives those opposing Russia's actions ample opportunity to exploit internal divisions and differences of opinion in the Russian government and in Russian society.

## **6. Conduct of Operations**

The conduct of Russia's pacification operations depends, primarily, on the type of operation. This is reflected in the mandate for operation, and the form of that mandate; the willingness to use force and the availability of resources; and the strategy designed for each particular case.

All pacification operations within the range discussed are essentially civic-military. Cooperation with local authorities is considered to be indispensable. This cooperation can take a variety of forms, from first installing a friendly regime and then using it as a puppet, as happened initially in Tajikistan, as well as in Chechnya, to working in parallel with the conflicting sides, as in the Georgia/Abkhazia, or North Ossetia/Ingushetia disputes to establishing ties with local strongmen, as Aslan Abashidze, the Ajarian leader, or the local authorities and field commanders in Badakhshan, and also in Chechnya.

<sup>23</sup> Col.General Boris Pyankov. "My obyazany utverdit' mir v Tadzhikistane". An interview with "Krasnaya Zvezda", 9 November 1993, p. 2.

After the period of "withdrawalism", when the Russians were either abandoning the former imperial outposts, such as Karabakh or South Ossetia, and were shy to use force even in self-defence, as in Tajikistan in the spring of 1992, the willingness to use force and sustain losses, if need be, is back. Chechnya is as good an example of this as any other. One might conclude from this that the Afghan syndrome has been largely overcome.

Willingness to use troops there may be, but the forces available remain scarce. In his letter to the Duma speaker Ivan Rybkin, dated 31 January, 1995, Mikhail Kolesnikov, Chief of the General Staff, estimated the size of a "special troop contingent" at 20,000 to 22,000 men. This may suffice for pure peacekeeping, but not for other missions.

Plans to organize Russian Peacemaking Forces as a corps within the Armed Forces have failed to materialize. At this time, there are two divisions which have been assigned peacekeeping duties: the 27th MRD of the Volga MD and the 45th MRD of the Leningrad MD. There are also Airborne Forces, ready for immediate deployment, but their resources are stretched thin. As to the Emergency Situations Ministry, which, it was initially thought, would have had to be the agency specializing in peacekeeping, its resources can only make it a provider of humanitarian supplies.

### *Failed neutrality?*

Initially, Russia tried to remain neutral to the conflicts on its former borderlands. Official neutrality was attempted in the autumn of 1991 in South Ossetia and Transdniestria. The members of the Soviet Union's disintegrating armed forces, however, were becoming progressively involved in the conflicts themselves: some were privately selling arms and ammunition to the warring factions, while others fought on the side of their ethnic brethren. Repeatedly, Russian forces got caught in the crossfire, and had to return the fire. Especially serious were attempts by the local authorities to appropriate Russian military arsenals. In Transdniestria, laws were adopted declaring those arsenals to be the property of the self-proclaimed Transdniestrian Republic. In Tajikistan, attempts to use the army as a power broker in the spring and summer of 1992 did not prevent the country slipping into a large-scale civil war. Thus, passive "neutrality" was leading to a loss of control. Only the bold action by General Alexander Lebed prevented the 14th army from being taken over by the Tiraspol authorities.

In some cases, as in the conflict between North Ossetia and Ingushetia in early November 1992, Russian inaction was clearly favouring one of the sides.

### *Choosing the right side*

Russia's lack of credibility as a fair dealer was most evident in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. In October, 1992, Russian observers all but allowed the pro-Abkhaz forces (the Chechens, ex-OMON people from the Baltic) to seize Gagra. Almost a year later, the Russians assisted in the Abkhazian seizure of the capital, Sukhumi, and the expulsion of the Georgians.

In other cases, the Russian military provided material support to one of the sides. During the conflict, Deputy Premier Georgi Khizha decided to issue the Ossetians with more arms equipment and ammunition. The Ingush considered this as pro-Ossetian. Later, in December 1992, Ingush President Ruslan Aushev demanded that a Russian Interior Ministry battalion, partly composed of ethnic Ingush, be deployed to Ingushetia. In South Ossetia, the Ossetian peacekeepers (and not the Georgians) were equipped by the Russians.

In several cases, the Russian forces actually merged with the party which they considered to be "right". In the midst of the civil war in Tajikistan, they started tilting to one side (the Popular Front), backing its October 1992 attempt to seize the capital, and then evacuating its leader. In 1993-1994, the CIS Collective Peacekeeping Force in Tajikistan included Tajik army units (though not, of course, those of the opposition, who were called "bandits" and "extremists"). On the eve of the flare-up of armed violence between North Ossetia and Ingushetia in 1992, the Russian Security Council ruled to unify Russian and North Ossetian Forces.<sup>24</sup>

Examples of this kind are abundant: they include, i.a., using PV helicopters to airlift, in early 1995 a Tajik government battalion to Badakhshan, which was considered by the opposition to be a major violation of the ceasefire agreement, and seriously undermined Moscow's credibility as a mediating party. This charge was denied by the Russian commander who said that the Tajiks in question were in fact Tajik nationals serving with the Russian Frontier Forces in Tajikistan, and in fact making up the bulk of enlisted men there. After a series of incidents in the spring of 1995, the Tajik opposition refused to continue to regard Russia as a neutral party. Defence Minister Pavel Grachev spoke against using the Russian Armed Forces and border guards "to neutralize band formations inside Tajikistan". (Dubnov, p.14).

As to the rules of engagement, they ranged from self-victimizing inaction to the use force in self-defence to a no-holds-barred situation. These included Vice President Alexander Rutskoi's threats to bomb Tbilisi unless the Georgian forces stopped their advance in South Ossetia; accusations of Russian aerial bombardments of Afghanistan to take out Tajik opposition strongholds and bases; large-scale aerial bombardments of Grozny and the mountainous villages in Chechnya in 1994-1995.

## **7. Is There a Political Control?**

In Russia, control of the use of military forces is performed by the Constitutional Court and the Parliament, with the President acting both as the Armed Forces' Commander-in-Chief and the supreme guarantor of the Constitution. A very special role was played by the Human Rights commissioner of the Duma and the President (a post occupied by Sergei Kovalyov).

The national leadership is reproached for illegal use of the military, while the troops are often accused of ill discipline, disrespect for local customs, and of having no clear idea of their role and functions.

The Constitutional Court considered the constitutionality of the presidential decrees of 30 November and 9 December 1994 ordering the Chechnya operation, and found that the President had every right to use military force to suppress an armed rebellion in any part of the Federation.

Members of the Russian parliament argued that the Presidential decrees "On the Fundamental Provisions of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation", which allowed the use of the Armed Forces, "On the Measures to Restore Constitutional Legality and Law and Order in the Territory of the Chechen Republic", which failed to proclaim a state of emergency in Chechnya, "On the Measures to Suppress the activities of Illegal Armed Formations in the Territory of the Chechen Republic and in the Zone of Ossetian-Ingush Conflict" were not consistent with the Russian Constitution.

They claimed that the 1992 Law on Defence, to date the only act governing the use of Armed Forces, does not recognize the use of the military in internal conflicts, except in situations gov-

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<sup>24</sup> Ossipova, p. 15.

erned by the Law on the State of Emergency, which demands that such use should be preceded by proper notification of both chambers of parliament.

The Presidential side claimed that the decrees agreed with the "content of the Constitution", and that the President as the guarantor of the Constitution and the Commander in Chief had every right to take all measures, including the use of the Armed Forces, to protect the population, and defend the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the state.

The Parliament debated the use of military forces, but without serious consequences. A parliamentary commission was formed by the Duma to look into the war in Chechnya, but the results of its work did not leave a lasting imprint. Also, the Parliament routinely sent delegations to the various "hot spots" where Russia was engaged in peacemaking.

The Human Rights Commissioner was active in Chechnya only, between December 1994 and mid-1995, when his post was abolished. As to other conflicts, the NGOs, such as Helsinki Watch or Amnesty International, as well as the Russian media, made the public aware of the developments.

Except for the small political rallies in Moscow and the attempts, in the wake of Chechnya, by a few regions of Russia, such as Chuvashia, to exempt local conscripts from military service outside of the home territory, the public remained largely unmoved by the use of military forces in the "hot spots". This was in striking contrast to the universal cry of "Bring the boys home!" which thundered across the country in 1991.

Whereas some two-thirds to three-quarters of the population were against the Chechnya war during most of 1995<sup>25</sup>, most of them felt for the Russian soldiers more than for the other victims of the war. So, while on the one hand, there was a "positive impact on the process of civic-society formation in Russia".<sup>26</sup> There was also a revival of chauvinistic attitudes and even elements of racism in Russia, when all "darkies" are increasingly and indiscriminately seen as bandits, criminals, etc.

## **8. Limits of Russian Military Involvement**

### *Political limitations*

As shown by both the peacekeeping operations and the war in Chechnya, military action can not be an end in itself. In intra-state conflicts, military solutions are illusory. The use of military forces can be of value only if it promotes a more or less stable political settlement.

Going it mostly alone, Russia bears the burden of a post- or neo-imperial power. She is not perceived as a foreign and impartial power, but rather as the new incarnation of the old "Centre". Throughout the former Soviet Union, there are groups vociferously opposed to a continued Russian role, and Moscow's interventionism has the inevitable effect of galvanizing that opposition. In Ingushetia, Russian forces have been seen, since the 1992 conflict, as unfriendly aliens. A testimony to this were the attempts to stop the Russian military advance into Chechnya, December 1994. In Chechnya itself, a generation may grow up who will regard Russia as the eternal enemy.

<sup>25</sup> Cf., e.g., Rozalina Ryvkina and Yuri Simagin. Status Chechni: naselenie protiv pozitsii vlastei. "Segodnya", 18 July 1995, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Aleksandr Iskandaryan. Chechnya: Nachalo bolshogo puti. "Novoye Vremya", No. 15, April 1995, p. 20.

While the Russians exercise their new pacifying mission, each side to each conflict will use their presence for its own purposes, trying to use the Russians as its allies. This almost automatically makes Russian actions suspicious in the eyes of all participants.

A serious weakness of Russian pacification efforts is a break between the military intervention and the political settlement. The longer the break, or the more acutely it is felt (as in Georgia, due to the pressure of the refugees), the less tenable the Russian position becomes. Moscow, however, believes that Russian presence should continue until the final settlement (South Ossetia, Transdniestria). Others may not see it that way, and try to delink the two issues, as Moldova.

The self-proclaimed states of Abkhazia and Transdniestria tend to use the Russians peacekeepers as a de-facto border force, protecting their new and unrecognized statehood, and freezing the situation on the ground to their advantage. Elections and constitutional referenda were taking place, which made dispute settlement ever more difficult. Their opponents, for their part, try to turn the Russians into a police force to right all the wrongs. (Georgians in Abkhazia)

### *Domestic political limitations*

On the whole, post-Communist Russian society has demonstrated a significant degree of indifference to the losses sustained as a result of military intervention. Briefly, as in the cases of the 1993 attack on a Russian frontier post on the Tajik-Afghan border, or the disastrous storming of Grozny on New Year's day, 1995, the media succeeded in sensitizing the public to the human cost of the various operations. The public response, however, was never very strong or lasting. Most Russians continued to be mostly concerned with their own daily survival in the midst of economic crisis, and learned to be indifferent to human suffering, if that did not affect them personally. The only groups which responded actively, and often effectively, were conscripts and their families. Draft-dodging has become commonplace; desertions from military units, especially in Chechnya, became a real problem; and the soldiers' mothers' movement received a powerful boost.

### *Financial limitations*

Budget constraints are among the most serious limitations to the new peacekeepers everywhere. Russia is no exception. At one time, the Defence Ministry was on the point of giving control over peace operations to the Emergencies Ministry, unless the budget carried a special provision for such operations. The war in Chechnya cost the MOD budget 1.9 trln roubles (about \$400 m), which amounted to some 5 per cent of the defence budget.<sup>27</sup>

### *Force limitations*

The Russian Armed Forces continue to shrink, without receiving a qualitative compensation. The way the forces were assembled for the Chechen campaign in the winter of 1994/95 is a graphic illustration of the paucity of manpower.

In an attempt to get around these limitations, Russian authorities have been drafting indigenous soldiers, under joint border defence agreements, into Russian-led forces. Thus, the 16,000 men strong Group of Russian Border Troops in Tajikistan, about 12,000 are Tajik citizens.<sup>28</sup> Similar situation exists in the Russian border troops in Georgia and Armenia. This harks back to a

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<sup>27</sup> Maj.Gen. Vladimir Osadchiy, of the MOD, as quoted by "Izvestia", 25 August 1995, p. 1.

Czarist tradition of extensive use of native-born officers and men in the forces deployed on the borderlands.<sup>29</sup>

## 9. An Evaluation of the Results of the Use of Force

Against such an array of challenges, it may look like a small miracle that the Russian military forces have been able to achieve such meaningful results in the search for the goal of pacification. Secession was forestalled, conflicts are either frozen (Georgia, Moldova) or manageable (Tajikistan).

The military's relative success has not been backed by spectacular political accords. Negotiations were started in all zones of conflict, but Russia's economic resources are too limited to back up a settlement with aid infusions. But even without it, Moscow remains too distracted to attach high priority to suspended conflicts. It took the Federal authorities a year to develop a program of measures to solve the Ossetian-Ingush conflict, but few of these measures were carried out since then.

The Russians were more successful in legalizing their military presence in the zones of conflict.

Even the Chechen delegation in Grozny had to agree to the stationing of two Russian brigades in the republic. In Tajikistan, even the opposition does not demand a Russian withdrawal. What they ask for is a UN-like impartiality. In semi-independent Badakhshan, which is ethnically different from the rest of Tajikistan, Russian forces are still welcome as protectors and sources of technical support, though not the Dushanbe government troops.

The impact of the new situation on the Russian forces themselves has been strong. For many servicemen, peacetime is over, and fighting is back. As in the 1800s, war on the borderlands is becoming routine. The Afghan syndrome has faded, but the Afghan experience is again in great demand. Memories of the Caucasian war of the 19th century are being revived, and the friend-and-foe mentality has become strengthened.

On the other hand, morale is being sapped by low pay and inadequate conditions of service on the borderlands. The CPKF Commander complained that his pay was six times less than that of a private UN peacekeeper.<sup>30</sup> A Border Troops officer serving in Tajikistan (probably in the captain - major category) was getting between 2 and 2.5 m roubles (about \$ 440 - 550) per month, four times the average salary in Russia and many times that in Tajikistan.<sup>31</sup>

Russian domestic politics, too, have experienced banalization of the use of force. In terms of the relations with the regions, the use of federal forces in Chechnya has produced only limited repercussions in the rest of the Northern Caucasus, except Ingushetia and Chechen-populated areas of Daghestan. There, Russia's role as an imperialist oppressor was confirmed. Other republics have not been affected. The local authorities are more afraid of the indigenous radicals, and the radicals appear to be deterred by Moscow's forceful action.

Implications for Russian foreign policy from Moscow's use of military forces have been manifold. Peacemaking gradually drew Moscow's attention to the near abroad and provided Russia

<sup>28</sup> Col.Gen. Andrei Nikolayev, as interviewed for "The Moment of Truth" programme by the RTR Russian Television, broadcast on 18 September 1995.

<sup>29</sup> Cf., e.g., Sergei Witte's memoirs: S.Yu.Witte. Vospominaniya. Tom 1, s....

<sup>30</sup> Boris Pyankov in "Krasnaya Zvezda", 9 November 1993, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Col.Gen.Andrei Nikolayev, as interviewed for "The Moment of Truth" by the RTR Russian Television on 18 September 1995.

with an opportunity to exercise the role it has been claiming for itself, that of a centre of power in the former Soviet Union.

Russia's neighbours generally see Moscow's attempts to be Central Eurasia's great stabilizer as a revival of neo-imperialist, or neo-derzhava policies. Some are willing to play along; others fear for their independence.

The use of force has its costs, both human and material. During the 9-year war in Afghanistan (December 1979-February 1989) the Soviet Union's losses amounted to some 15,000, including 13,833 in the 40th Army.<sup>32</sup> The military's losses in Chechnya amounted to about 1500 in the eight months of the operation. From 1988 till mid-1995, the Airborne Forces lost more troops than they did during the Afghan war.<sup>33</sup> The Border Troops in Tajikistan have lost about 100 men at the hands of the opposition forces. Terrorism is another problem: 15 Russian servicemen were killed in Tajikistan in 1994, and 13 in the first half of 1995.<sup>34</sup> In the first two years of its existence (1993-1995), the CPKF lost 29 men killed. (LTG Valentin Bobryshev, Commander, CPKF, in an interview with "Krasnaya Zvezda": "Voyennaya pobeda oppozitsii nevozmozhna", 23 September 1995, p. 2).

Civilian casualties in Chechnya, between December 1994 and December 1995 are estimated at some 25,000.

Material cost of the Chechnya war is put by some analysts at \$5 bn in the first six months. Indirect material losses include a drop of at least 27 per cent in foreign investment in Russia in the first quarter of 1995, as compared with the fourth quarter of 1994, which could be attributed to the war in Chechnya. (Elena Fyodorova. Voyna v Chechne stala baryerom dlya inostrannykh investitsiy. "Finansovye Izvestia", 27 June 1995, p. 2).

Thus, the question remains unanswered, will Russia, by means of using force, restore its greatness or will it instead exhaust itself?

## 10. Is There Place for Multilateralism?

Initially, in 1991-1992, the Russian government was seized by the euphoria of "returning to the civilized world". The international community, led by the United Nations, it was believed, would resolve post-Soviet crises, and relieve Russia of the burden of imperialism.

Since mid-1992, apprehension started growing within the Russian governing elite that multilateral peacekeeping was in fact paving the way for foreign penetration, detrimental to the interests of the Russian Federation.

In early 1993, Moscow declared the whole of the former USSR to be a zone of Russia's vital national security interests. It was willing to cooperate with international organizations, but on the basis of a privileged Russia+UN (CSCE) formula, sharing the burdens and the costs of peacekeeping with others.

There being few takers, Moscow started using the CIS as a useful umbrella for its activities. In actual fact, Russia has been going it largely alone. This unilateralism can be damaging to Russian interests, arousing suspicions of imperialism, and threatening with overextension of Russia's strained resources.

<sup>32</sup> Col.Gen. Boris Gromov, as interviewed by Russian TV, on 19 August 1995.

<sup>33</sup> Colonel General Yevgheni Podkolzin, interviewed by "Moskovskie Novosti", No. 51, 30 July - 6 August 1995, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Vitali Strugovets. "Tajikistan: Zatishye pered burei?" "Krasnaya Zvezda", 20 July 1995, p. 2.

Still, multilateralism is seen as constraining Russia. The result of the OSCE's efforts could in fact be "to reduce the freedom of action of Russian military forces in other states of the former Soviet Union which are the seat of ethnic conflict".<sup>35</sup>

There are some prospects for two security regimes appearing in Europe: one Transatlantic (NATO-centered), and one Eurasian (Russian-led). This would serve Russia's ambitions, and probably give NATO a new role to play, but would effectively divide Europe in terms of security regimes.

Still, there is some place for true multilateralism in peacekeeping. Moscow's unprecedented agreement to have a OSCE mission in Chechnya is not to be underestimated.

## Conclusions

The use of force by the Russian Federation as a means of stability building represents, to a large extent, a new phenomenon. It substantially differs both from the Soviet and imperial Russian tradition and from the current practices of other countries.

The Russian Federation has quickly overcome its aversion to the use of military force for purposes other than defence against direct attack. Foreign interventions, and even massive use of violence within Russia's borders are generally, although passively, accepted. As evidenced by the war in Chechnya, the Afghan syndrome has ceased to play a restraining role.

Russia's actions in the NIS are hardly an attempt at imperial restoration. In fact, Russia's case is almost unique in that we have an empire which was willing to break up without a fight, and armed forces which made no attempt to intervene to salvage the state they served, and waited patiently to be divided up, withdrawn or de-commissioned. Initially, the Russian Federation was reluctant to use force to manage or stop conflicts in the NIS, and when it did use it, this was often based on the recognition that military force was the only surviving component of national power at Moscow's disposal.

Viewed from a different perspective, Russia's use of force for 'peacemaking' is anything but disinterested. Moscow can not be expected to be impartial to what it regards as its national interest.

A striking feature of the Russian use of force is confusion regarding its strategy, often due to political struggles in Moscow, and occasional loss of control at operational and tactical levels, pointing to the loss of governability of the nation in general and the drop of discipline among the military in particular.

Institutionally, the decision-making process on the use of force is often impenetrable to outsiders. The Executive and, above all, the Presidency clearly dominates it. The rise and fall in the influence of other executive players, such as the Cabinet and the Prime Minister, are indicative of the changing balance of power in the Russian capital.

The role of the Legislature, which in 1991-1993 used to compete with the Executive for ultimate power and used the areas of conflict as an extended battlefield in its struggle against the President, is severely limited by the 1993 Constitution. Still, the upper chamber has the power to approve sending Russian forces abroad, and the lower house has become the focus for national debate on the use of force.

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<sup>35</sup> Blackwill in "Engaging Russia". p. 51.



The Judiciary, and the Constitutional Court in particular, has become an active participant only recently. Apparently deterred by the memories of its unfortunate political involvement in 1993, it is careful not to antagonize the Executive with its verdicts.

The media, on the contrary, have been active in examining, and often criticizing, the way Russian forces were used in the various conflicts in the NIS, and especially in Chechnya. The latter represents a striking example of the Russian Federation fighting its first war under conditions of a free press, with the scenes of the battle for Grozny and the Prime Minister's telephone negotiations with the terrorists brought to the Russian people's homes in real time.

The public, however, has remained largely apathetic both to the conflicts in the NIS, even where the local ethnic Russian communities had to suffer, and to the Russian government's use of force to manage those conflicts. Even the war in Chechnya, except for its more dramatic episodes, has failed to mobilize public opinion.

Russia's attempts at using its military as an instrument of stability-building have evoked mixed reaction abroad. WITHIN THE CIS, Russia's new client states or allies have been trying to use it to bolster their positions. Others believe they have reasons to fear Russian interventionism. In a number of instances, the use of force by the Russian Federation is taken to be the testimony of the allegedly incurably expansionist nature of Russian expansion. The major Western states are prepared to let Russia engage in stability-building efforts as long as this does not impinge on the Western interests in such areas as the Baltic States, or the Crimea. This appears to be well understood in Moscow.

For Russia, the results of the use of force in the various conflict situations have been both positive and negative.

Russian intervention has been successful in containing and freezing, if not ending, some of the post-Soviet conflicts, thus preventing the worst and creating conditions for political settlement.

In other cases, most notably in Chechnya, but also in Tajikistan, armed intervention has led to Russia's progressive involvement in protracted conflicts, demanding heavy losses and offering little chance of an early disengagement.

With many of the NIS remaining very unstable for years to come, Russia will pursue its efforts to pacify its immediate environment and to protect its national interests. In this, Moscow will predictably continue to find few rivals, but many critics.

**Dmitri Trenin**

## **Russia's Use of Military Forces in Intra-State Conflicts in the CIS**

**Bericht des BIOst Nr. 32/1996**

### **Summary**

#### *Introductory Remarks*

Since 1991, Russia has been involved in a number of violent conflicts on the territory of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Its military activities have taken quite different forms - from peacekeeping missions to direct military intervention - and have accordingly been differently assessed - as an effective stabilization measure in inter-ethnic "conflict situations" or as part of a "re-imperialization strategy". Up to now, however, little attempt has been made to see the Russian "peacekeeping" activities for what they really are: the use of military force as a way of stability-building or pacification in a region that is regarded as the zone of Russia's vital national security interests. For this reason, the present report endeavours to analyse Russia's military activities in the context of its regional security interests. It is based on a number of case studies and on a review of ongoing press coverage.

#### *Findings*

1. Following an initial phase after the disintegration of the USSR during which Russian officialdom appeared reluctant to intervene in the conflicts that broke out in the New Independent States, as of about 1993 a consensus emerged among the Russian political elite to the effect that the CIS region was vital to Russian security interests. The ongoing conflicts within the region justified, indeed necessitated military intervention. At first, the purpose was to defend the unity of the Russian Federation, but later this aim was extended to managing the crises within the CIS and to reducing the level and scale of violence. In the course of time, other motives such as the desire to protect ethnic Russian minorities and to defend the perimeter boundaries of the region, the former Soviet borders, gained in importance, too. Russia's influence in the New Independent States needed to be strengthened, foreign influences rolled back, and Russian access to the natural resources of the New Independent States secured. Besides these national interests, the special interests of particular groups - for example the power ministries or regional elites - can also play a very significant rôle.
2. In the beginning, the Russian political class shied away from using military force. The constitution of national governments in Chechnya, Georgia and Moldova, which openly turned against the central government in Moscow, and the emergence of the Islamic movement in Tajikistan drew no resolute response from the Russian authorities. In the case of Chechnya, the Supreme Soviet even expressly banned the use of military force in late 1991. Soon, however, the new Russia's leaders became aware that they had hardly any other means of influencing developments in these regions. Russia's economic, financial and diplomatic resources were either lacking or very scarce, so Russia turned to the only instrument it still had - the armed forces.

3. The objectives sought through the use of military force were manifold. In some cases, the aim was to suppress secessionist rebellions, in others to end chaos and stop armed violence or - where conflict had not yet openly broken out - to preserve the peace. In some regions, however, - e.g. in Georgia - the goal was to install and support a regime friendly to Russia or to create propitious conditions for a political dialogue. But besides these more political intentions there were also some purely military objectives - to restore the "common defence space" and to contain potential military threats. No clear dividing line can be drawn in the CIS between essentially peaceful missions and the use of military force. While the actions in South Ossetia and Transdniestria were evidently of a peacekeeping nature, the operation in Georgia in late 1993 was clearly intended as a demonstration of military strength. Russian troops have variously been deployed in the context of police actions, in counter-terrorist campaigns, and in their own covert subversive operations. Military force has been openly used in a number of peacemaking actions, in the defence of borders or - in the case of Chechnya - in outright warfare.
4. Theoretically, the use of military force is governed by the principles of legality, prevention and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. In practice, however, these principles have been hardly evident. Few agreements on peacekeeping have been concluded within the framework of the CIS; in many cases the legal basis for Russian actions are trilateral agreements between Russia and the two warring sides. *De jure* it is the President who decides on the deployment of troops, *de facto* the decision appears to be taken within a very small inner circle. Apparently nowhere were the Russian military themselves the prime instigators of peace operations. As soon as they become involved in a conflict, however, they tend to elude control by the political authorities, taking decisions of their own accord.
5. It is clear that, in intra-state conflicts, military solutions are illusory, only political settlements can be viable in the long run. In many cases, however, it has not been possible to reach such a settlement. Actions by the Russian armed forces are constrained by the shortage of financial resources, by obstructionism on the part of conscripts and their families, and by the declining combat capability of the army. Nevertheless, the Russian armed forces have achieved a number of military successes which, however, have not been carried through to political accords. This is having repercussions on the armed forces themselves, which for all practical purposes find themselves in a state of war in many locations. Continuing casualties and rising material costs are placing a burden on Russian politics. There is no sign of any clear-cut strategy on the use of military force.